

UNIT I

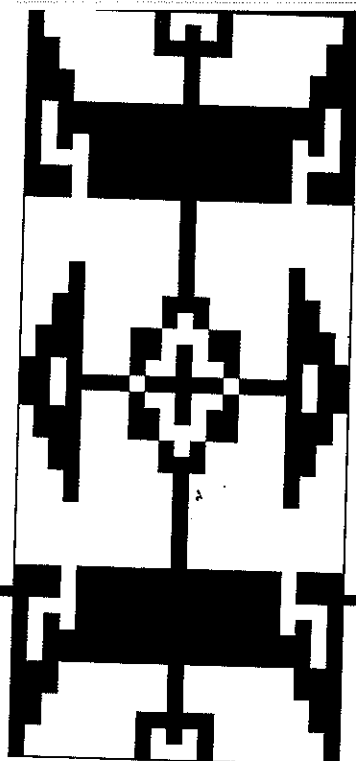
ORAL TRADITION OF THE PLAINS NATIVE AMERICANS

Oral tradition refers to the process of passing down sayings, songs, tales, and religious and spiritual beliefs from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Because early Native Americans did not have a written language, they relied on the oral communication of stories as a way of passing on the traditions of their culture. In some nations, the person with the best memory and the most imaginative skill became the “keeper” of that nation’s history, songs, and myths.

Folk tales were an important part of the social and cultural life of Native Americans, regardless of their nation. Through the talent of a good storyteller, Native Americans could be carried away to an imaginary world. The dramatic effect was not only derived from the tale itself, but also from the various methods the storyteller used, such as the repetition of incidents and images.

The literature you are about to read is rooted in Native American oral tradition. Each selection reveals the values and beliefs of the speaker’s culture and uses the methods of oral communication. The first selection, from *Black Elk Speaks*, tells the story of an Oglala medicine man who discovered his healing powers through nature. Next, the author Mark St. Pierre introduces you to Madonna Swan and retells how she learned the values of the Lakota from her extended family. The last selection, “Remaking the World,” a folk tale told by Leonard Crow Dog, explains the creation of the world. As you read these selections, try to imagine how they would sound if spoken aloud.





INTRODUCTION

The First Cure

The following selection is from a book called *Black Elk Speaks*. The book presents the spiritual values that Black Elk, an Oglala medicine man, experiences in a vision during his nation's troubled times in the mid-1800s. Black Elk believed that his purpose in life was to "save his great vision" for people of all groups, cultures, and places. Black Elk's story, spoken in Lakota and translated into English by his son, is a series of flashbacks and memories, rather than an organized account of his life and vision. It took the friendship and insight of John G. Neihardt, a poet familiar with Native American culture, to capture the spirituality of Black Elk's message.

The excerpt you are about to read describes one of Black Elk's visions that led him to an herb with healing power. His methods and cures were rooted in the traditional Oglala belief in nature as the giver of life and the Sun, Moon, and Winds as the "controllers" of the universe.

The First Cure

from *Black Elk Speaks*

as told through John G. Neihardt



. . . It was in the Moon of Shedding Ponies (May) when we had the heyoka ceremony.¹ One day in the Moon of Fatness (June), when everything was blooming, I invited One Side to come over and eat with me. I had been thinking about the four-rayed herb that I had now seen twice—the first time in the great vision² when I was nine years old, and the second time when I was lamenting³ on the hill. I knew that I must have this herb for curing, and I thought I could recognize the place where I had seen it growing that night when I lamented.

After One Side and I had eaten, I told him there was a herb I must find, and I wanted him to help me hunt for it. Of course I did not tell him I had seen it in a vision. He was willing to help, so we got on our horses and rode over to Grass Creek. Nobody was living over there. We came to the top of a high hill above the creek, and there we got off our horses and sat down, for I felt that we were close to where I saw the herb growing in my vision of the dog.

1. **heyoka ceremony** (hay-YOH-kah SER-uh-moh-nee) *n.* a religious rite meant to show both serious and comic sides of life

2. **great vision** *n.* refers to a spiritual experience

3. **lamenting** (lah-MENT-ihng) *v.* to feel or express deep sorrow

We sat there awhile singing together some heyoka songs. Then I began to sing alone a song I had heard in my first great vision:

"In a sacred manner they are sending voices."

After I had sung this song, I looked down towards the west, and yonder at a certain spot beside the creek were crows and magpies, chicken hawks and spotted eagles circling around and around.

Then I knew, and I said to One Side: "Friend, right there is where the herb is growing." He said: "We will go forth and see." So we got on our horses and rode down Grass Creek until we came to a dry gulch, and this we followed up. As we neared the spot the birds all flew away, and it was a place where four or five dry gulches came together. There right on the side of the bank the herb was growing, and I knew it, although I had never seen one like it before, except in my vision.

It had a root about as long as to my elbow, and this was a little thicker than my thumb. It was flowering in four colors, blue, white, red, and yellow.

We got off our horses, and after I had offered red willow bark to the Six Powers, I made a prayer to the herb, and said to it: "Now we shall go forth to the two-leggeds, but only to the weakest ones, and there shall be happy days among the weak."

It was easy to dig the herb, because it was growing in the edge of the clay gulch. Then we started back with it. When we came to Grass Creek again, we wrapped it in some good sage that was growing there.

Something must have told me to find the herb just then, for the next evening I needed it and could have done nothing without it.

I was eating supper when a man by the name of Cuts-to-Pieces came in, and he was saying: "Hey, hey, hey!" for he was in trouble. I asked him what was the matter, and he

said: "I have a boy of mine, and he is very sick and I am afraid he will die soon. He has been sick a long time. They say you have great power from the horse dance and the heyoka ceremony, so maybe you can save him for me. I think so much of him."

I told Cuts-to-Pieces that if he really wanted help, he should go home and bring me back a pipe with an eagle feather on it. While he was gone, I thought about what I had to do; and I was afraid, because I had never cured anybody yet with my power, and I was very sorry for Cuts-to-Pieces. I prayed hard for help. When Cuts-to-Pieces came back with the pipe, I told him to take it around to the left of me, leave it there, and pass out again to the right of me. When he had done this, I sent for One Side to come and help me. Then I took the pipe and went to where the sick little boy was. My father and my mother went with us, and my friend, Standing Bear, was already there.

I first offered the pipe to the Six Powers, then I passed it, and we all smoked. After that I began making a rumbling thunder sound on the drum. You know, when the power of the west comes to the two-leggeds, it comes with rumbling, and when it has passed, everything lifts up its head and is glad and there is greenness. So I made this rumbling sound. Also, the voice of the drum is an offering to the Spirit of the World. Its sound arouses the mind and makes men feel the mystery and power of things.

The sick little boy was on the northeast side of the tepee,⁴ and when we entered at the south, we went around from left to right, stopping on the west side when we had made the circle.

4. tepee (TEE-pee) *n.* a cone-shaped tent made of animal skins

You want to know why we always go from left to right like that. I can tell you something of the reason, but not all. Think of this: Is not the south the source of life, and does not the flowering stick truly come from there? And does not man advance from there toward the setting sun of his life? Then does he not approach the colder north where the white hairs are? And does he not then arrive, if he lives, at the source of light and understanding, which is the east? Then does he not return to where he began, to his second childhood, there to give back his life to all life, and his flesh to the earth whence it came? The more you think about this, the more meaning you will see in it.

As I said, we went into the tepee from left to right, and sat ourselves down on the west side. The sick little boy was on the northeast side, and he looked as though he were only skin and bones. I had the pipe, the drum and the four-rayed herb already, so I asked for a wooden cup, full of water, and an eagle bone whistle, which was for the spotted eagle of my great vision. They placed the cup of water in front of me; and then I had to think awhile, because I had never done this before and I was in doubt.

I understood a little more now, so I gave the eagle bone whistle to One Side and told him how to use it in helping me. Then I filled the pipe with red willow bark, and gave it to the pretty young daughter of Cuts-to-Pieces, telling her to hold it, just as I had seen the virgin of the east holding it in my great vision.

Everything was ready now, so I made low thunder on the drum, keeping time as I sent forth a voice. Four times I cried "Hey-a-a-hey," drumming as I cried to the Spirit of the World, and while I was doing this I could feel the power coming through me from my feet up, and I knew that I could help the sick little boy.

I kept on sending a voice, while I made low thunder on the drum, saying: "My Grandfather, Great Spirit, you

are the only one and to no other can anyone send voices. You have made everything, they say, and you have made it good and beautiful. The four quarters and the two roads crossing each other, you have made. Also you have set a power where the sun goes down. The two-leggeds on earth are in despair. For them, my Grandfather, I send a voice to you. You have said this to me: The weak shall walk. In vision you have taken me to the center of the world and there you have shown me the power to make over. The water in the cup that you have given me, by its power shall the dying live. The herb that you have shown me, through its power shall the feeble walk upright. From where we are always facing (the south), behold, a virgin shall appear, walking the good red road, offering the pipe as she walks, and hers also is the power of the flowering tree. From where the Giant lives (the north), you have given me a sacred, cleansing wind, and where this wind passes the weak shall have strength. You have said this to me. To you and to all your powers and to Mother Earth I send a voice for help."

You see, I had never done this before, and I know now that only one power would have been enough. But I was so eager to help the sick little boy that I called on every power there is.

I had been facing the west, of course, while sending a voice. Now I walked to the north and to the east and to the south, stopping there where the source of all life is and where the good red road begins. Standing there, I sang thus:

"In a sacred manner I have made them walk.
A sacred nation lies low.
In a sacred manner I have made them walk.
A sacred two-legged, he lies low.
In a sacred manner, he shall walk."

While I was singing this I could feel something queer all through my body, something that made me want to cry for all unhappy things, and there were tears on my face.

Now I walked to the quarter of the west, where I lit the pipe, offered it to the powers, and, after I had taken a whiff of smoke, I passed it around.

When I looked at the sick little boy again, he smiled at me, and I could feel that the power was getting stronger.

I next took the cup of water, drank a little of it, and went around to where the sick little boy was. Standing before him, I stamped the earth four times. Then, putting my mouth to the pit of his stomach, I drew through him the cleansing wind of the north. I next chewed some of the herb and put it in the water, afterward blowing some of it on the boy and to the four quarters. The cup with the rest of the water I gave to the virgin, who gave it to the sick little boy to drink. Then I told the virgin to help the boy stand up and to walk around the circle with him, beginning at the south, the source of life. He was very poor and weak, but with the virgin's help he did this.

Then I went away.

Next day Cuts-to-Pieces came and told me that his little boy was feeling better and was sitting up and could eat something again. In four days he could walk around. He got well and lived to be thirty years old.

Cuts-to-Pieces gave me a good horse for doing this; but of course I would have done it for nothing.

When the people heard about how the little boy was cured, many came to me for help, and I was busy most of the time.

This was in the summer of my nineteenth year (1882), in the Moon of Making Fat.

AFTER YOU READ

Exchanging Backgrounds and Cultures

1. What role does the sound of the drum play in Black Elk's ability to heal?
2. How do Black Elk's methods for healing reflect the Oglala belief in the power of nature?
3. What does Black Elk's statement, "I would have done it for nothing," reveal about his values?

What Do You Think?

Which character, event, or image in this story was most meaningful to you? Why was it special?

Experiencing Oral Tradition

In this account, Black Elk describes how he helped his people by finding the herb he saw in his vision. Think of an incident from your own life in which you helped someone. Then tell the story of this experience to a classmate as though it were an oral tradition.

Optional Activity Remember that in oral tradition, words and images are often repeated to make stories more memorable. Throughout his account, Black Elk repeated certain images, such as the rumbling sound of the drum. Write a brief descriptive passage about an aspect of nature. Be sure to repeat words and images.